

Social, Legal, and Ethical Implications of the Employing of Fact-Checking Services on Social Media

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Abstract—The recent partnership between Full Fact and Facebook which received media coverage presents a number of Social, Legal, or Ethical issues, largely to do with potential conflicts of interests in the motives of the organisation and its members; and the overall morality and ethics of the arbitration of truth. Many of these potential largely left-wing political conflicts can be explained as a result of the higher prominence of the sharing of fake news in right-wing social circles, however the potential implications of a government motivated movement towards such arbitration leaves room for possible institutional abuse of the system.

1 INTRODUCTION

Facebook on the 11th of January announced a partnership with a UK based fact-checking charity known as 'Full Fact'. The charity reported on its blog[1] that it would begin fact-checking images, videos, and articles on Facebook.

The Organisation explains that Facebook users will be able to flag content they believe may be false, and it will be forwarded to the Full Fact team. After review, the team will have rated them according to Facebook's rating scheme which marks them as one of the following[2]:

- 1) False — The primary claims are incorrect.
- 2) Mixture — The claims of the content are a mixture of accurate and inaccurate, and the primary claims are misleading or incomplete.
- 3) False Headline — The claims of the body of the content are true, but the headline is inaccurate.
- 4) True — The primary claims of the content are accurate.
- 5) Not Eligible — The content is unverifiable, was historically true, or is agenda based.

- 6) Satire — The content has been posted by a satirical publication.
- 7) Opinion — The content is personal opinion or self-promotional.
- 8) Prank Generator — The content is created as a 'prank'.
- 9) Not Rated — The content has not been rated.

Readers of content will be provided to the rating as given above, and will have access to read more about the source of content. Content rated false will be given lower prominence in users feeds, making it less likely to be seen.

This partnership was reported on by the BBC[3], who highlighted the recent result discovery that the elderly are more likely to share fake news on Facebook, and that the Brexit referendum and 2017 general election both were 'tarnished by fake news', and that 'social media firms have been threatened with regulation if they fail to do something about the issue'.

2 SOCIAL ISSUES

The problem of fake news has been a social issue in the public eye, and has grown in prominence since 2016, coinciding with the start of the US political race that ultimately resulted in the election of Donald Trump, a phrase used prominently by the then future president to describe media outlets that promoted his opponents[4]. The phrase rose to prominence, and began being used across the political spectrum to describe content perceived as deceptive or misleading.

This two-sided approach to the evaluation of fake news, with people on different sides of the political spectrum defining different things as fake

news, provides the crux of the social issues raised by the use of fact-checking, it's neutrality.

Full Fact presents itself as Independent as a registered charity, and Impartial as an organisation that does not support any political party or campaign, as well as having a cross-party board of trustees to ensure neutrality.

However, those who provide large amounts of funding for a charity can influence its policies, as charities might act in the interest of ensuring they retain funding. Looking into the funding sources for Full Fact.

In the past, they have received their largest donations from Google, George Soros and Pierre Omidyar[5][6]. Soros is a billionaire credited for donating to many charities, but is often accused by (dominantly American) right wing supporters of using his wealth and influence to shape the modern world in a view opposed to theirs[7]. Omidyar is noted as having contributed largely to organisations active in left-wing politics[8].

The validity of the claims against Soros and Omidyar is a complex and difficult to research subject, with information being both suppressed and fabricated for and against the claims. Though the clear controversy and conspiracy theorising, as well as their previous politically motivated investments, might call into question the neutrality of the donations and therefore of Full Fact itself.

These potential conflicts of interest may result in the suppression of content that shows donors and their views in a poor light. This would result in the suppression of these views both in terms of how content is interacted with and it's prominence and how readily it is displayed to people.

For obvious reasons, the official release from Full Fact does not comment on the impacts of a potential political conflict of interest, pushing their (very possibly true) stance that they are able to be political neutral. The BBC does not comment on this issue either.

3 LEGAL ISSUES

On the face of it, there do not appear to be legal issues with this partnership. Facebook is within its legal rights to choose what content is displayed on their website. However, a single line in the BBC article highlights a kind of legal issue that might be presented: the law acting against the interests of the public, as a tool of information control and censorship.

“The Brexit referendum and the 2017 general election were both found to have been tarnished by fake news, and **social media firms have been threatened with regulation if they fail to do something about the issue.**” (Emphasis Mine)

If, as suggested by the BBC article, the motivation for this new partnership can be found in the threat of regulation and legislation being passed without it, that sets a troubling precedent.

The existence of such a threat, especially in the given political conflicts, might threaten action from the government if content that acts against its interests are not actively suppressed. Much like the social issue of a conflict of interest in funding, the potential legal implications of the threat presented in the BBC article demonstrates a conflict of motivation from altruistic promotion of factually accurate content, to face-saving in the face of a threat of mandated government actions that might be considered censorship.

4 ETHICAL ISSUES

With 35 million users from the UK, Facebook is used by around half the population[9]. This demonstrates incredible staying power 13 year old social network, as well as it's potential reach and influence.

To have Facebook labelling the truth of content sets a worrying precedent for abuse and misinformation. It would be alarmist to suggest parallels with Orwell's ministry of truth[10], who actively serve to pedal propaganda and misinformation, but it is certainly worth questioning the potential impacts of the arbitration of truth.

One important consideration is satire vs false information, though Facebook's system will provide a means for Full Fact to mark an article as satire. This leaves room for abuse however, as through incorrect identification or through malicious suppression, satire distasteful to the organisation or it's workers (as might have been suggested by the conflicts of interests outlined in the previous two sections) might be instead marked as false, as there is often little indication of the intention behind a publication. This could cause materials to be artificially hidden or given lower prominence on users Facebook feeds, the specific implications of this are troubling for political satire, which has historically been used prolifically in the united kingdom when dealing with the actions of politicians with respect to current events, and often provide a valuable resource when analysing the opinions of people in the past. Could extracts of Shakespeare's works

satirising the kings of the past not be interpreted as false claims about the monarch, and therefore suppressed were such an arbitration of fact applicable in his historical period.

Neither the BBC or the Official Release speculate on or highlight the potential pitfalls of entrusting an institution to decide what is true and what is not.

5 MERITS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Setting aside for one moment the negative implications of the partnership, it could serve to solve a serious problem effecting the modern world. The spread of factually incorrect information influencing world politics. Russia is alleged to have spread fake news throughout the UK in the influencing of the Brexit vote[11], as well ongoing investigations taking place into similar propaganda techniques used during the United States 2016 Election.

In terms of the demographics of consumption, those over 65 and those that hold right wing views are more likely to share 'fake news' [12], a fact that may provide basis for why those with more left wing interests invest in the suppression and highlighting of such things: not as a means of suppression of truth, but as a means of limitation of damaging falsehood. It has however also been demonstrated that the vast majority of people do not share fake news stories, regardless of their political affiliation, though this does not fully account for the '1% rule'[13] which states that one percent of users will create content, 9 percent of users will contribute and share content, and the other 90 percent will simply view content, as such the biasing towards users not actively sharing content is expected and does not necessarily reflect the incidence of users who do share content and therefore dominate users social feeds.

6 CONCLUSION

The partnership which was covered by the BBC and in the official release provides a means for increased understanding of source material and quick assessment of the truthfulness of content by users of the Facebook website. On the face of it, this will aide people in better understanding the content that they read. On the other hand, where fact arbitration is done by humans there is always room for bias, though this can be mitigated and controlled on an institutional level. Full fact is also developing an automated system, however these are historically poor at identifying things such as satire (as should

be seen in YouTube's persistent inability to identify copyright fair use), and there is no indication yet that such a system will be used in the UK.

The potential threat of regulation and legislation may provide a motivation in the implementation of this system from the government itself, and as such provides a more worrying conflict of interest when it comes to fact arbitration: it remains to be seen how well the system will identify satire and content that reflects poorly on the powers that perhaps motivated the creation of the system.

The political affiliation in the donations to the charity might imply a potential left-wing bias in its own fact finding, however this might simply be explained by the higher prominence of false information being shared by right-wing users of the system; thus showing a much less sinister side to the desire for fact arbitration from such donors.

The media coverage of the partnership by the BBC did not discuss the potential negative implications of such a service being used, and did not provide a comprehensive analysis of its potential pitfalls, opting instead to discuss only the need for the system and its potential benefits.

Ultimately, the system is new and largely unprecedented in social media, and so a retrospective on this partnership and the effectiveness of the tool would be necessary to form a full opinion on its overall social, legal, and ethical implications.

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